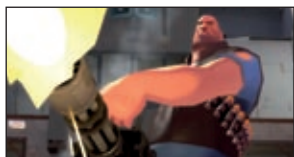


GAMES

PREVIEW

VALVE/EA The Orange Box



The curiously named Orange Box contains five games. Two you may have played before: the excellent Half-Life 2 (HL2) and the episodic follow up, HL2: Episode One. The three new segments are HL2: Episode Two, Team Fortress 2 and Portal.

HL2: Episode 2 continues the story of Gordon Freeman's struggle against the sinister Combine. If you've played HL2 and Episode One, we're sure you'll be keen to continue the story. If not, The Orange Box is the perfect introduction to one of the best PC games ever.

The last Team Fortress was released in 1999, so this sequel has been a long time coming. It's already been entertaining us for weeks, with excellent teaser trailers showing imaginative cel-shaded graphics and brilliant character design. See <http://tinyurl.com/28qevx>.

Finally, there's Portal. This ingenious first person puzzler arms you with a device that can create a pair of connected portals, which you must use in inventive ways to get out of otherwise impossible situations.

The Orange Box looks set to be the biggest PC gaming bargain of all time. Don't miss our full review next month.

Seth Barton

Video and games expert

seth@computershopper.co.uk



ACTIVISION Enemy Territory: Quake Wars

★★★★

£18 inc VAT

From www.amazon.co.uk

Gamers are used to needing top-end hardware, but these days a fast internet connection is becoming just as much of a necessity. Enemy Territory: Quake Wars practically demands a speedy broadband connection, as it has clearly been designed with online multiplayer as its focus.

Having Quake in the name, and being the fifth full game to use it, means the designers have a background and universe from which to draw – but it's pretty thin, inconsequential stuff. All four previous Quake games focused on action, and so it remains with Quake Wars. Aliens, known as the Strogg, have invaded Earth. Humans, in the guise of the Global Defense Force (GDF), must fight back.

Players can fight for either side across a series of large maps, taking the battle to the other guys by traversing the extensive terrain with jauntily angled weapons in hand. However, Quake Wars is more complex than most FPS games, and you don't have to look far to discover this. It is not a game that reveals its charms gradually. Everything you need to know is onscreen from the beginning, and as a consequence the interface is cluttered and confusing from the start.

The game's developers have clearly spent a lot of time watching how people play online shooters. Quake Wars' clutter is actually a well-balanced series of missions, objectives and team chatter that add structure, rhythm and purpose to the often random experience of online games. Each player can see a



▲ A variety of vehicles are at your disposal, but be warned: the quad bike is the least lethal of all of them

variety of missions marked on the map, along with the experience points that completing them will yield. Players on either side can take to the battlefield in a variety of different roles, and completing an objective successfully requires teamwork and cooperation between characters equipped with different skills.

The 12 maps also contribute to the game's strategic depth, as they are studded with vehicles you can use, along with plenty of buildings, cover and short cuts. The game itself changes as matches progress, awarding bonuses when you're being particularly effective.

Once you've put in the time to master the game and found some like-minded players online, Quake Wars can be a great experience, but it has a steep learning curve. While training with the bots in single-player mode helps, a great game happens only when you play with other decent players. Still, if you're fed up with the chaos of Battlefield 2 and want an online shooter with more depth, Quake Wars is a decent choice, although it's likely to be overlooked given the release of Valve's Team Fortress 2.

Alex Watson

SUMMARY

- ✓ Competitive, well-planned online play
- ✗ Underwhelming single-player mode
- ✗ Steep learning curve

ACTION GAME Requires Windows XP/Vista, 2.8GHz processor, 512MB RAM, 5GB disk space
PART CODE 32885.202.00
DETAILS www.enemyterritory.com

Top 5 games

1. BioShock

£25 inc VAT ★★★★★



BioShock successfully blends first-person shooting with RPG-style character upgrades. It's set in an undersea city that's both terrible and beautiful to behold.

SUPPLIER www.play.com DETAILS www.cultofrapture.com FULL REVIEW Dec 2007



2. Lord of the Rings: Shadows of Angmar

£13 + £9 a month inc VAT ★★★★★



This online role-playing game lets you immerse yourself in Tolkien's Middle Earth. The game's detail is truly stunning, it's easy to get into and the combat is excellent.

SUPPLIER www.gameplay.co.uk DETAILS www.lotro.com FULL REVIEW Sep 2007



3. Colin McRae: DiRT

£18 inc VAT ★★★★★



This game is a double-whammy of remarkable graphics and intense physics. Never before has a road surface felt so real. It's an amazing leap forward for driving games.

SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk DETAILS www.codemasters.com/dirt FULL REVIEW Sep 2007



4. Supreme Commander

£13 inc VAT ★★★★★



This RTS has the biggest battles ever seen on a PC. There's a vast range of units to command and the graphics are slick, but you'll need a powerful PC to run it smoothly.

SUPPLIER www.powerplaydirect.com DETAILS www.supremecommander.com FULL REVIEW Apr 2007



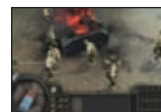
5. Company of Heroes (DX10)

£15 inc VAT ★★★★★



Bombed French towns look better than ever in this DX10 version of our 2007 Best Game award winner. But it's the innovative gameplay that makes this the top RTS.

SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk DETAILS www.thq.com FULL REVIEW Jan 2007





▲ The British Commandos are like superheroes, and can take down tanks by themselves

THQ Company of Heroes: Opposing Fronts

★★★★★

£25 inc VAT
From www.amazon.co.uk

World War II-set Company of Heroes is the greatest real-time strategy game ever made, according to some. Its only problem is that when you play it, you could be forgiven for thinking the Americans won the war on their own. This standalone expansion pack addresses that, not only by introducing the British into the game, but by making them Company of Heroes' most enjoyable side to date.

They're not the usual stiff-upper-lipped stereotypes: these guys are made of pure grit, and express it by being hilariously foul-mouthed and incredibly resilient. While Company of Heroes' other armies are primarily offensive forces, the British work best as a defensive entity, digging in and weathering the Axis storm until they've enough resources to call in some truly devastating artillery.

Their opposite number, the German Panzer Elite, sacrifice heavy armour for high mobility and plenty of punch, and make life a nightmare for Allied tanks. They're not as endearing as the Brits – being Nazis, this comes with the territory – but they, too, are far from the balanced armies of the original Company of Heroes. Both new factions break with some of the traditions of the parent game and the genre to rejuvenate and rethink a classic game.

As a result, Opposing Fronts isn't as accessible as its forerunner. As the two new factions are so different from others in the genre, things get complicated very quickly. If you're not familiar with Company of Heroes, it'll take a while to get your head around this. It's made for multiplayer, but the forgettable single-player campaign doesn't entirely nail how the Brits and Panzers are best used in the intensity of an online match. Opposing Fronts is a military marvel if you enjoyed Company of Heroes, but prepare for a steep learning curve.

Alec Meer

SUMMARY

- ✓ Enough ideas to make an old game new
- ✓ Doesn't require the original game to play
- ✗ Overwhelming if you're new to the series

REAL-TIME STRATEGY Requires Windows XP/Vista, 2.0GHz processor, 512MB RAM, 64MB graphics card, 10GB disk space
PART CODE B000VQVZSE
DETAILS www.companyofheroesgame.com



▲ Head into castles and towns to trade, but be careful, as your reputation may precede you

SOUTHPEAK Two Worlds

★★★★

£25 inc VAT
From www.amazon.co.uk

As the Orc god Aziraal returns from the dead and war threatens to engulf the land, you take the role of a mercenary trying to find your kidnapped sister, taking on missions for gold and favours as you continue your quest. Your reputation precedes you, so be careful as attacking an innocent villager could lead to you being set upon wherever you go.

Two Worlds doesn't have the initial hand-holding approach that made us fall for Oblivion last year. You're on your own as soon as the game starts, and as the game world is vast, it's easy to feel lost, walking for minutes before you find anything interesting. When you do interact with non-player characters, it's to fight, trade or talk. Trading is worthwhile to acquire better armour and weapons, but much of the dialogue is stilted and often unnecessary.

Fighting should be fun, of course, but there's not enough variation in the creatures you come across. When you die, Two Worlds drops your character at one of the healing shrines, which are not always near the point where your character died. This can be irritating, although it sometimes gets you out of a tight spot. The map in the corner of the screen is revealed as you travel around, but it's a bit small. Once you've been resurrected, your previous trail may not be easy to find.

You have only male characters to choose from, but there are a few options: you can change your height, build and colouring. The graphics are decent, although the middle distance is slow to draw, which makes things seem flat and lacking in detail until they're close to your character. The sound effects and eighties electronica soundtrack are great, but they don't make up for the fact that the game is slightly boring.

If you really enjoyed Oblivion, you may want to try this. However, our advice would be to take your passion online and play World of Warcraft or Lord of the Rings: Shadows of Angmar instead.

Matt Smith.

SUMMARY

- ✓ Decent graphics
- ✗ Not enough variety
- ✗ Dull interactions with non-player characters

ROLE-PLAYING GAME Requires Windows XP/Vista, 2.0GHz processor, 512MB RAM, 2GB disk space
PART CODE 74084-SLV
DETAILS www.2-worlds.com



▲ Race 07 lets you race in touring cars, Minis and open-wheelers such as Formula 3000 cars

ATARI Race 07: The Official WTCC Game

★★★★★

£25 inc VAT
From www.play.com

SimBin has made a string of superb racing games, including GTR, GTR 2 and GT Legends. Few other games give you such a feel for what it's like to race real cars around real circuits.

Last year's Race was disappointing, though. Although it accurately modelled the 2006 World Touring Car Championship, it felt a little off the pace of its predecessors. Realising this, SimBin has shifted up a gear for Race 07, which features not just the 2007 season, but also 2006 and 1987. You also get BMW Mini racing, Formula BMW, Formula 3000 and Radical SR3 and SR4.

As you'd expect if you've played any of the earlier games, each car looks and feels realistic inside and out. The touring cars have plenty of understeer and sound exactly as they do on TV. The open-wheelers have oodles of grip and must be driven with care to avoid damage and endless spins, although you can enable the usual driving assists to help you.

It's great to see new tracks, including the fast and twisty Zandvoort, plus Anderstorp and Pau. Although each circuit has been reproduced with careful attention to detail, we couldn't help feeling there had been little progress since the last version – a disappointment after the slick intro video. We like the new Target Frame Rate option, though, which can adjust the quality settings automatically until the game runs at the frame rate you set.

Another bonus is the helmet camera, which is a great view for driving, and there are more multiplayer options than before. After a few hours of play, we noticed that the AI drivers were making more driving errors, but we never experienced the often-frenetic wheel-to-wheel action and crashes that you see on TV.

Race 07 doesn't have the best graphics we've seen. However, it is good fun and offers a variety of racing styles for your money.

Jim Martin

SUMMARY

- ✓ Plenty to keep you interested
- ✓ Great physics, especially with a steering wheel
- ✗ Average graphics and AI

RACING SIMULATION GAME Requires Windows XP/Vista, 1.7GHz processor, 512MB RAM, 256MB graphics card, 4GB disk space
DETAILS www.race-game.org